A FEW MODEST TRUTHS
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Psalm 23
Mark 6:30–34, 53–56

"He saw a great crowd and had compassion for them. . . .
Wherever he went they begged him that they
might touch even the fringe of his cloak."
Mark 6:34, 56 (NRSV)

"I don't believe in God, but I miss him."
Julian Barnes
Nothing to Be Frightened Of

"Thou madest us for thyself,
and our heart is restless until it repose in thee."
Augustine of Hippo, 354–430 A.D.
The Confessions of St. Augustine

Jon Krakauer, author of several best-sellers, including *Into the Wild*, a few years ago took up the task of writing a book about an appalling crime committed by two brothers, members of a radical fundamentalist Mormon sect, who believed they were ordered to kill by God. In the course of telling the story, Krakauer also tells the larger story of Mormonism, its beginnings, its history and growth, its presence in American culture, and the subset story of the radical fundamentalist groups that have spun off from it: sometimes violent, sometimes practicing polygamy, as in the news last year. It was a gripping, engrossing read. At the end of the book, Krakauer added a section, "Author's Remarks," and he concludes with a reflection so striking I wrote it down and saved it for a Sunday like this one:

> I don't know what God is, or what God had in mind when the universe was set in motion. In fact, I don't know if God even exists. If I remain in the dark about our purpose here and the meaning of eternity, I have nevertheless arrived at an understanding of a few more modest truths: most of us fear death. Most of us yearn to comprehend how we got here and why — which is to say, most of us yearn to know the love of our creator. And we will no doubt feel that ache, most of us, for as long as we happen to be alive. (p. 34)

What a remarkable statement, a kind of confession of faith, actually. Most of us yearn not only to know but to experience God. And our yearning is an authentic part of who we are. It is built into us. Julian Barnes begins his recent best-seller, *Nothing to be Frightened Of,* with the haunting line, "I don't believe in God, but I miss him." Sixteen centuries ago, one of our earliest and best intellects, Augustine, put it memorably: "Thou madest us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in thee." The longing to know God, the yearning for what Jon Krakauer described as the love of our creator—all of that is an essential part of our humanity, part of what makes us human.

The story of Jesus and his disciples and the pushy, insistent crowd can be read as an illustration of that. When he sent them out two by two, he told the disciples to take nothing along except the clothes on their back and a staff to lean on and sandals for their feet. So off they went, telling people about Jesus and that the kingdom of God was here and that everybody should repent and pay attention. After a while they all returned and caught up with him—you know, when you return from an adventure you need to talk about it. "Debriefing," we call it, and if there is stress and demand about the adventure, you're exhausted as well. (I went on an Outward Bound expedition once, and when I returned home, I couldn't stop talking about it for days.)

So Jesus wisely says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile." Mark adds a fascinating detail: "For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat," which sounds like a description of the hectic lifestyle of a lot of people I know. That's a topic for another time. For now, we have twelve exhausted young men, needing more than anything else to talk about their experiences, and at Jesus' invitation, they are headed down the coastline of the Sea of Galilee, which is a fresh water lake actually, to that deserted place. I have in mind a lovely beach and a grove of trees, grass, shade, a place to fish and build a fire and eat and drink wine and talk late into the night. But wait—here comes the crowd. They have seen Jesus and the disciples in the boat and deduced where they are headed, so they're running along the shore: scrambling, tripping and falling, old ones and young ones, families with their children, grandparents on crutches; several hundred of them now, keeping one eye on the boat and the other eye on the destination—the deserted place—and they arrive before the boat does. As Jesus steps out of the boat, there they are, waiting for him. So much for the retreat.

He looks at the crowd and has compassion. The agenda is set aside instantaneously. The disciples see an unwanted, unwelcome interruption. Jesus sees lost sheep needing a shepherd. Compassion trumps the disciples' needs, their exhaustion.

I love the vignette the late Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest and theologian, told about himself. When he first came to this country, I believe to teach at Notre Dame, Nouwen said he was surprised at the way American professors kept their office doors open. “Aren’t you constantly interrupted?” he asked a colleague. “How do you get any work done?” His colleague responded, “Henri, your interruptions are your work,” a bit of truth relevant for all busy people.

Now there are so many people crowding around him that Jesus and the disciples get in the boat and try again, this time on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. And there on the other side, another crowd waiting. There is a sense of urgency now: people from the entire region rushed to bring their sick to him. In fact, wherever he went, people rushed to see him, even in marketplaces they laid their sick at his feet and begged simply to touch the fringe of his cloak. “And all who touched it were healed.”

The people in these stories are not passive, sitting around waiting for something to happen. They run ahead of him; they anticipate where he’s going and get there first. They are insistent; they push and shove to get close enough to touch him. They are not very orderly. One commentator has a little fun comparing this crowd of pushing, shoving, needy people with a typical congregation of Presbyterians, sitting properly and quietly in the pews. She never yet heard of a bunch of Presbyterians who get up early and run to church to get there ahead of the preacher (Cheryl Bridges Johns, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 3, p. 263).

Why all this urgency? I think it has everything in the world to do with what Jon Krakauer called the universal ache, the yearning “to know the love of our creator.”

In her new book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “If I had a dollar for every time I heard someone say, “I am spiritual but not religious’” I might not be any wiser about what that means but I’d be richer. I hear the phrase on the radio. I read it in interviews.”

Every clergyperson hears it, as soon as people discover what we do for a living: in premarital counseling, on airplanes—“I’m a spiritual person, but I’m not religious.” Taylor says it means that “they want to grow closer to God. Some of them have resigned from religions they once belonged to. . . . Plenty of them are lonely . . . longing for more meaning, more feeling, more connections, more life. . . . They know there is more to life than what meets the eye. . . Even religious people are vulnerable to this longing” (“Introduction,” pp, xiii–xiv).

Well, if you agree that Jon Krakauer, Julian Barnes, and St. Augustine are right and that there is a universal human yearning for God, this story contains two important truths. The first is that there is a God who cares about you, who understands you, a God who so thoroughly knows and understands you that God actually hurts when you hurt and is glad when you are glad and weeps when you weep and laughs when you laugh. And the second truth is that there is healing in knowing that: that simply to get close enough to Jesus, to touch the fringe of his cloak, is restorative and healing.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, retired professor of theology at McGill University, says that when Jesus steps off that boat and has compassion on the crowd, we approach the very center of our faith. "Compassion," Hall says, "is the essence of the one who has created us and before whom life is lived." Mostly, Hall says, primitive and modern religion regard God as "ominous, wrathful, angry, vindictive," but here is a God who is none of that, a God who is moved by human need and reaches down to deal with it.

Jesus' compassion for the crowd is not just about a very good man who lived 2,000 years ago; this is about an eternal, timeless truth; this is about God (see *Feasting on the Word*, ibid, pp. 261–264).

This idea that God is compassionate is so far-reaching, so radical, that people struggle with it, doubt it, compromise it, attach conditions to it, and in the worst case turn it upside down and come out with the opposite: a God who issues commandments, becomes angry when disobeyed, and appoints representatives to be his prosecuting attorneys, judge, jury, and punisher. Every religion, our own included, has its radical fringe that not only ignores this central notion of a compassionate God but preaches an exclusivist doctrine that cannot tolerate the other and manages somehow to transform compassion into hatred. It's what happened to the fundamentalist Mormons, to the young Sunni Muslim who straps explosives around his waist and blows himself up in a busy marketplace.

Karen Armstrong, in a fascinating book, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* says that the great world religions have their foundations in the ninth century BCE in the thinking of religious sages, which flowered later—Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And at the core of these original, ancient beliefs she finds the concept of divine compassion. Over the many centuries we all have tended to forget that. We have all been irrational and cruel and intolerant and violent on occasion. Christians and Jews who like to regard Islam as uniquely and fundamentally violent—you hear that a lot these days—need only to read the fifteenth chapter of 1 Samuel, sacred scripture for both Jews and Christians, and ponder the prophet Samuel's instructions to King Saul regarding the

Amalekites: “Now go and attack the Amalekites and utterly destroy all that they have: do not spare them but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” (1 Samuel 15:3). To make matters worse, when Saul follows those instructions but decides to spare some of the livestock and the life of the Amalekite king, Agog, God gets really angry and strips Saul of his office. In an effort, I assume, to compensate for his disobedience, Saul then summons King Agog and dispatches him: “hewed Agog in pieces before the Lord,” the Bible says.

There’s plenty of that to go around. No religion is blameless, in antiquity or today. Karen Armstrong is right, I believe, when she says “our only hope as a civilization is to return to the depths of wisdom explored in the Axial Age, 3,000 years ago: a God of compassion and a religious ethic—which is ultimately expressed in politics, economics, public policy—with compassion at its center” (see Douglas John Hall in *Feasting on the Word*).

Preachers are always on the lookout for good news about religion in the media these days because there is so much bad and embarrassing news. And so a column on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* recently caught my eye: “Defecting to Faith” by Charles Blow, the *Times*’ “Visual Op-Ed Columnist.” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life issued a report in May that documented the percentage decline of mainline churches and the percentage decline of Christians in our ever-more religiously diverse culture. But Charles Blow found a fascinating statistic inside the bigger picture: contrary to conventional wisdom that most people are religious because they’re raised to be—they’re indoctrinated by their parents—the fact is “most children raised unaffiliated with a religion later join one.”

When Pew asked why, the answer was “the experience of unmet spiritual need.” Charles Blow comments,

> Nonreligion misses the ethereal part of our human exceptionalism—that wondrous, precious part where logic and reason have little purchase, where love and compassion reign. It’s the part that fears loneliness, craves companionship, and needs community and fellowship. . . . We are more than cells, synapses, and sex drives. We are amazing and mysterious creatures forever in search of something greater than ourselves. . . . Being regularly surrounded by a community that shares your convictions and reinforces them through literature, art, and ritual is incredibly powerful, and, yes, spiritual.

Interesting: human yearning for God, for the love of our creator, is met not privately, but in community—in church, synagogue, mosque.

When Dr. George Tiller was gunned down last month while he handed out bulletins in his Wichita, Kansas, Lutheran church—gunned down for

providing late-term abortions (not to anybody who wanted one, by the way, but for patients who for critical health reasons needed one), killed by a religious fanatic, I called my brother, Bill. He's the County Manager of Sedgwick County, where Wichita is. He's a Presbyterian Elder, a thoughtful Christian, and I knew he'd be dealing with this—the killer is in Bill's county jail—and I knew that as a churchman Bill would be feeling it deeply. I called to let him know I was thinking about him. He told me he was fine, told me that several of his staff members were members of the Reformed Lutheran Church and were in the sanctuary when it happened; one woman saw it. The next day he sent an email: "I thought of a couple of things we didn't chat about."

> Reformation Lutheran Church has endured numerous protests and several disruptions of their worship services. I am not aware of any support for them from either anti-abortion Christians or pro-choice Christians. We could have done more to support [the congregation] and counter the hateful language they were hearing. My deep regret is that I was personally silent—the sin of silence may be the most harmful of them all.

And then Bill described sitting in his church, the First Presbyterian Church of Wichita, that Sunday morning. His cell phone vibrated. He ignored it, until it happened a third time and he stepped out. It was the County Sherriff's Department telling him the news. During the Passing of the Peace he told the pastor what had happened. She told the congregation. "There were audible gasps. She led us in prayer for our community, the Reformation Lutheran congregation, and the Tiller family. It was comforting and a manifestation of why I belong to a church family."

It is healing to know that there is One who cares, a God of compassion. It is not just an interesting idea; it is a healing reality to get close to Jesus, to reach out and touch the fringe of his cloak.

When the chips are down, when life takes an unexpected turn—

> the job you have counted on to provide for your future and to give you a sense of who you are comes to an end—it is healing to know about One who knows and cares;
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> the tests come back and the news is bad and you face surgery or chemotherapy and you are suddenly and acutely aware of your mortality —it is quietly and powerfully healing to know that you are not in this alone, that there is One who is with you and will be with you
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> the relationship that has been your life ends, the child in whom you have invested your life leaves, the pregnancy you have longed for and invested

> in ends prematurely—whenever the bottom falls out of your life, as it does sooner or later for all of us, it is healing and life-giving and hope-generating and strength-producing to know that there is a God whose very being is compassion.

It is the essence of your humanity and mine to yearn for that God, to “ache to know the love of our creator.”

And so maybe the best news in all the world is in this little story—“a few modest truths,” to borrow Jon Krakauer’s phrase—in two single sentences:

“As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd and had compassion for them,” and “they begged to simply touch the fringe of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.